Open Schooling

Why Open Schools are Re-emerging as a New Model

Open schools are urgently needed to provide access to education for millions of children who currently have no access to any formal schooling. In 2010, an estimated 71 million lower secondary school-age children were out of school worldwide (UNESCO: Global Education Digest 2012: Opportunities lost, the impact of grade repetition and early school leaving, page 10).

Access remains inequitable, especially in rural areas with girls being particularly disadvantaged. As governments stretch their resources to make progress towards the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education by 2015, it is unlikely that the expansion of conventional secondary schooling will be a priority. And even if one new secondary school were to be built every month for the next ten years, the increased demand will not be met.
Open schooling, as defined by the Commonwealth of Learning involves “the physical separation of the school-level learner from the teacher, and the use of unconventional teaching methodologies, and information and communications technologies (ICTs), to bridge the separation and provide the education and training”. We call it open schooling rather than open and distance schooling because openness and flexibility are more important features than physical separation.

Open schools can be either complementary or an alternative to the conventional school system. Some open schools aim to enrich the classroom experience rather than create a substitute for it, but flexibility with and complementing the conventional system are both important features of open schooling.

- As an alternative, open schools can reach new markets through an expanded curriculum. They can provide a different, more adult-relevant learning experience for older students, who never had a chance to attend or complete their formal education at school level, or a more vocational-oriented programme for out-of-school youth.

- As a complementary system, open schools offer the same curriculum for children and youth who, for a variety of reasons, have not been a part of the formal, classroom-based school system.

Open schooling can be adopted for a range of purposes and it can use a variety of technologies and approaches ... and it can be applied very differently from one jurisdiction to another. It seems clear that open schools work better if they are given a degree of autonomy and not run as branches of government.

(Sir John Daniel, Perspectives on Distance Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century, Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Preface, p.vi)
Increasing the breadth and equality of access

Where traditional schools cannot respond to the high demand for education, open schools can be a key strategy for increasing the volume of access and can do so moderately, significantly or dramatically. Cognizant of the fact that secondary school students require more support than university-level distance learners, open schools rely on an extensive network of study centres where learners are supported on a regular basis through contact sessions.

Open schools, through cross-enrolment (that is, simultaneous enrolment in conventional schooling and open schooling) can alleviate the burden on conventional schools and allow them to better respond to demand.

Ensuring that the curriculum provided to secondary school learners is relevant to the needs of their various constituencies

Given the huge number of out-of-school children at the secondary level, we are conscious that expanding access through increased enrolment solves only part of the problem. Accommodating significantly larger numbers of secondary school learners also results in increased pressure on governments to redefine the way in which secondary education can address societal needs through diversification of the curriculum. Developing and implementing such a strategy will ensure that the needs both of the target groups and of national development are met.

Critical to achieving these goals is the availability of not only academic but also technical and vocational programming. Open schools show that they are both achieving significant accomplishments in this regard, and that they also have tremendous potential.

(Abrioux & Ferreira, Perspectives on Distance Education: Open Schooling in the 21st Century, Conclusion, p.196)

Improving the quality of teaching and learning

Since quality assurance is a major concern for policy makers, it should be reassuring that open schools can offer the same or better quality than their conventional schooling counterparts. Solid open schooling policy is required, however, to help define minimum standards of service delivery and assure that open schools adhere to them.

Maximising the cost-effectiveness, cost-efficiency and sustainability of educational systems

Open schools are not just concerned with increasing access to secondary schooling, but also with equalising educational opportunities for citizens regardless of their geographic location or socio-economic background. Through a well-articulated policy, broad consensus on the most appropriate direction for the future development of open schooling can be achieved at a national level, while eliminating duplication and overlap. A policy can also facilitate the planning for joint initiatives that maximise the value obtained from limited state funding.
ACTIVITIES:

Establishing new open schools
Open schooling is increasingly recognised as a viable solution to the growing demand for equitable access to schooling, especially girls and marginalised groups in remote locations. Over the next three years COL’s Open Schooling Initiative will continue to work with ministries of education, institutions and NGOs to establish new open schools to increase learning opportunities, particularly for girls, out-of-school youth and people in remote areas.

*It was indeed a pleasure to learn about the Open School which is excellent for Belize. With this new innovation, many more of our students will have access to quality education and I am so grateful that you brought it to our country.*

Dr. Carol Babb, Deputy CEO

Material Development in Technical/Vocational Subjects
Technical vocational education, skills and training are crucial to a country’s broader education agenda and essential to the development of a knowledge society, economy and democracy. Despite this need, and much debate, it has yet to take firm root. Open schools have the potential to offer a diverse curricula and even support the conventional system with subjects which cannot be offered due to teacher shortages. Open schooling will, over the next three years, assist institutions to introduce technical and vocational subjects to promote skills development and attract learners who would otherwise have stayed away.

Capacity building to ensure integration of technology and OER
There is sufficient evidence available to show that technology has an important role to play in open and conventional schools. It can successfully be used to enhance the reach, strengthen operational systems and improve pedagogical practice. Technology also allows the blurring of boundaries between conventional and open schooling. Over the next three years COL’s Open Schooling Initiative will continue to build the capacity to ensure the integration of technology and the adoption and use of open educational resources (OER).
Policy and system development and implementation

Policymakers and heads of open schools must ensure that an enabling policy is in place before starting an open school. They must have the autonomy and flexibility to adapt operations to changing conditions and emerging technologies so that they can continue to provide effective and efficient services. At the heart of this, is the enabling policy. Furthermore institutional accountability relies on complete, accurate and transparent data, which is only possible with the right systems in place. Over the next three years COL's Open Schooling Initiative will assist open schools to increase learning opportunities through policies and systems adoption.

Innovation for girls’ education

Many girls struggle to stay in school because it is too far or too expensive or it fails to provide a safe environment. It is expected that open schooling will benefit marginalised girls in multi-faceted ways. COL has harnessed the potential of open and distance learning (ODL) and the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) and OER. Girls will be provided with relevant training to gain skills to use technologies while the capacity of teachers will be built for effective teaching instruction and to create a girl-friendly environment.
Open schooling is a feasible solution

- 61 million primary–school-age and 71 million lower-secondary-school age children were out of school in 2010 (UIS, 2012). With the work COL has been doing in open schooling over the past decade we are in a position to advise ministries of education on what makes open schooling more or less expensive and to assist them to control costs. COL can help ministries of education to design open schools that will broaden access to a significant number of students at a reasonable cost, compared to the cost of expanding conventional schooling.

Can open schooling be an equaliser for educational opportunities?

Many girls have left school at an early age due to various traditional norms. When asking a group of girls in Jessore, Bangladesh, “Why do you want to go back to school?” One of them responded, “I left school in year 5 to marry my husband at the age of 12. I am now 22 and have three children, as a mother I would like to help them with their schoolwork, but I can’t, because I did not complete school.

Open schooling has no age restriction and can diversify its curriculum to respond to the needs of its target group. For this group of girls and many similar out-of-school youth, open schooling can be an **Equalizer** for educational opportunities. COL is supporting the Open School at the Bangladesh Open University with the development of technical and vocational subjects to offer an opportunity to the girls in marginalised communities to complete their secondary education. Not only will they complete their secondary education, but it is envisaged that this program will contribute to the creation of sustainable livelihoods for them.
Encouraging the growth of open schooling is one of the eight key initiatives outlined in the Commonwealth of Learning’s Three-Year Plan for 2012–2015 (*Learning for Development*).

Recognising the importance of partnerships in meeting the need for a dramatic expansion in access to all levels of schooling and vocational education, COL initiated the establishment of the Commonwealth Open Schooling Association (COMOSA). It is a dynamic community of institutions/organisations dedicated to the development of open schooling as a means of providing educational opportunities for all. It supports the view that open schooling has the capacity to expand access, to promote equity, to deliver high-quality and effective services and to reduce the unit costs of education at all levels.

Building on the flexibility that is a primary strength of open schooling, COL, with the generous support of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has invested in the development of open educational resources (OER), bringing new technologies and collaborative tools to teachers in developing countries to address the challenges they are facing in providing good-quality education and effective integration of technology in the classroom. The development of OER will not only address the issue of access, it will also help in enhancing the quality of education in both the conventional and open schooling systems.
Connect to our Open Educational Resources for Secondary Schooling

http://www.col.org/resources/crsMaterials/osoe/ Pages/default.aspx
http://openschooling.colelearning.org/osa/
http://openschooling.colelearning.org/bw/
http://openschooling.colelearning.org/ls/
http://openschooling.colelearning.org/ostandt/
http://openschooling.colelearning.org/sc/

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